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## COLUMNIST

# The Multiple Political Travels of Steve Sweeney

By Carl Golden | July 1, 2021, 1:24 pm | in **Columnist** (<https://www.insidernj.com/category/columnist/>),  
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In the odd-numbered year immediately preceding a presidential election, assorted members of Congress, former members, sitting and ex-governors, and successful business leaders build their summer travel vacations around stops in Iowa and New Hampshire.

It's all innocent, they say, just wanted to check out the amazing new butter sculptures at the county fair or sample the fresh maple syrup outside Manchester. Maybe give a speech or two, renew acquaintances with local sachems and chat with those with donor histories.

It's all part of the elaborate quadrennial mating dance, of course, and everyone involved understands the ritual is the opening act of a 24-month performance run.

Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) understands the appeal Iowa and New Hampshire hold for the ambitious and has brought it closer to home, embarking on his own summer tour through Hudson, Bergen, Essex, Mercer, Middlesex, Passaic, Union and Somerset counties. (<https://www.insidernj.com/destination-bergen-sweeney-swims-northern-waters/>)

There's no butter sculptures or gallon jugs of maple syrup to be found, of course, but for Sweeney, there's something far more appealing — a combined 1,559,226 registered Democrats, just over 60 percent of the statewide total.

Accompanied by his longtime confidant and supporter South Jersey powerbroker George Norcross, Sweeney has paid visits to county leaders and legislators to, as Norcross characterized it, “keep the lines of communication open.”

That's the worst disguise since Clark Kent's glasses.

The curtain's gone up on Act I of a 2025 Sweeney for Governor effort, with the Senate President in the lead role and determined to avoid being shoved out of the spotlight as he was in 2017 when Phil Murphy blinded county chairs with the glare from his checkbook, bankrolling county organizations and candidates in return for endorsements and the county line placement on their ballots.

Sweeney and, for a time, Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop, understood the hopelessness of competing and the field was cleared for Murphy.

Sweeney's visits are a reminder to local leaders that should Democrats retain control of the Legislature this year — an outcome altogether likely to the point of certainty — he'll become the longest serving Senate President in state history.

Gubernatorial nominations, favorable legislation, appropriations and appointments will all flow through his office between now and 2025.

County leaders do not require a degree in meteorology to understand which way the wind is blowing.

If a reminder is necessary, the list of Senate add-ons to the state budget — those spending items not included in the governor's initial budget submission — will suffice.

Not surprisingly, local projects in Gloucester County received the largest number at six. Middlesex and Camden counties each received three; Bergen was awarded two while Essex, Hudson Monmouth, Burlington and Mercer secured one each.

It should be noted that while Essex received but one add-on, it was by far the largest — \$5 million for Newark Symphony Hall.

To be sure, Sweeney may face primary opposition for what will be an open governor's seat in 2025.

Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver, having served potentially for eight years at Murphy's side, will certainly be in the conversation, while others mulling it over will emerge from time to time. Four years will provide ample time for mulling.

Republicans will enter the contest with a dose of optimism, largely because history favors the out party.

For instance, the last time a Democrat succeeded a Democrat in the governor's office was 1961 when Richard Hughes followed Bob Meyner to the executive office.

(Former governor Jim McGreevy resigned from office and, after 18 months of a non-elected acting governor Dick Codey, Jon Corzine was selected).

Sweeney's aggressive move is aimed at locking up support early, building momentum and achieving status as the inevitable nominee.

While he won't be tramping around the knee-high snows of Iowa and New Hampshire, he'll spend the next four years leaving deep footprints in north, central and south Jersey — deep enough to swallow up the ambitions of potential opposition.

The history of his tour companion Norcross is seen by some as risky, given the powerbroker's well publicized and occasionally vitriolic confrontations with Murphy, although the two have since made up and played nice.

While his power base is south of Trenton, Norcross is a large presence in state politics and has extended his reach into other regions, notably Middlesex County.

In the often convoluted and seemingly illogical environment of politics where allegiances shift suddenly, friends become enemies and vice-versa, Sweeney obviously feels Norcross brings far more to the table and outweighs the risk of upending the table.

The strategy appears sound, its execution well thought out, and the end result clear and within reach.

No need for Sweeney to include Iowa and New Hampshire on his list of desirable vacation spots.

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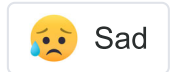
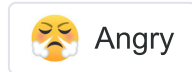
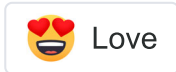
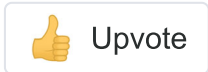
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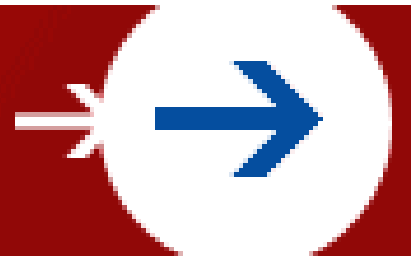
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